

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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ALLIGATOR COMEBACK PROMPTS REMOVAL FROM ENDANGERED LIST:
NOW CLASSIFIED THREATENED

Over 500,000 American alligators representing close to 75 percent of the United States population have been proposed for transfer from the Endangered Species List to the less restrictive Threatened Species List by Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The amazing comeback of the alligator shows what concerned citizens can do when they decide to help wildlife," Keith M. Schreiner, head of the Federal endangered species program, said. "The Federal Government was only the transmission mechanism for this successful recovery of an endangered species. It was the citizens and conservation officials of some Southeastern States, insisting that local legislation be passed to protect the alligator, who accomplished this.

"Also, the citizens and conservation officials of New York and California deserve a special share of thanks from all Americans for making their concerns about the alligator known and urging legislation which stopped commerce in alligator hides and products. It was the individual citizen who brought this about, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wishes to express its gratitude for the wide public support it received from private parties and conservation groups as well as State governments in carrying out this effort."

(more)

The proposal was published in the Federal Register on April 7, 1976. Public comments are invited through June 7, 1976. Comments should be addressed to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 19183, Washington, D.C. 20036.

The proposal would:

--Remove the alligator from the endangered category and place it in the threatened category in all of Florida and the coastal portions of Georgia, Louisiana (except Vermilion, Cameron, and Calcasieu Parishes), South Carolina, and Texas.

--Leave the alligator classed as endangered in the rest of its range in all of Mississippi, Alabama, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and North Carolina, as well as inland areas of South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas.

--Recognize the unique status of alligators in the above mentioned three parishes of Louisiana where the populations biologically are neither endangered nor threatened but have been listed as threatened because of their similarity of appearance to the endangered alligators. This procedure is intended to avoid illegal traffic in hides of animals that are truly endangered. Under a rulemaking published in the Federal Register of September 26, 1975, the State of Louisiana may conduct a strictly regulated commercial harvest of alligators in these three parishes.

--Allow the taking of sick, orphaned, dead, or demonstrably threatening alligators by designated Federal or State employees or agents. Disposal must be in accordance with directions from the Service. Such designated officers may also take alligators for scientific or conservation purposes, and may sell the hides if properly tagged.

Alligator populations vary from State to State, but nationwide there are an estimated 734,400 'gators--that's about a threefold increase in numbers since the early 1960's. This figure becomes even more significant in view of the fact that this numerical increase occurred during a time when the loss of suitable habitat for the alligator was accelerating. This fact of the alligator's life--loss of living space--will in all probability continue to be the animal's major problem.

Gators are thickest in Louisiana. It's almost cheek-to-jowl alligator in the three parishes of the State where they have a unique status because they are so numerous--about 100,000 alligators in 1,800 square miles of swamp, which averages out to 60 a square mile in Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu Parishes.

In contrast, alligator numbers in areas where they will remain classified as endangered are significantly lower. The following population numbers pertain to such areas: inland South Carolina, 16,200; inland

Georgia, 14,101; inland Louisiana, 7,352; inland Texas, 7,492; Mississippi, 4,740; Alabama, 12,715; North Carolina, 1,314; Arkansas, 1,900; and Oklahoma, 10.

In all areas where the alligator is to be classified as a threatened species, the population trend is reported to be increasing. Population estimates for these areas are as follows: coastal South Carolina, 32,500; coastal Georgia, 15,853; Florida, 407,585; coastal Louisiana (excluding Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu Parishes), 94,779; coastal Texas, 19,292. Altogether, 570,009 alligators are found within the area where the species is proposed as threatened--more than 75 percent of all the alligators estimated to occur in the United States.

Despite these seemingly high figures, alligator populations in the involved areas are considered "threatened" within the definition of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The reptile has few natural enemies, but many eggs are eaten by raccoons. Young alligators face numerous hazards, and their natural mortality rate is high. With many forces at work against it, the species is nowhere as abundant and widespread as formerly. Large parts of its range have been occupied and modified by man to such an extent that they are unusable by the alligator. The areas where reclassification is to occur are entirely within the rapidly developing coastal sections of the Southeastern United States. Alligators in these areas are now considered numerous enough and sufficiently protected legally not to require endangered status, but the past history of decline gives cause for concern. When coupled with the history of commercial exploitation of the alligator, the prospects for future habitat loss fully justify the "threatened" classification, Fish and Wildlife Service officials believe. This species has a very high commercial value and could easily be wiped out over large areas in a relatively short time if controls were lifted altogether.

The dramatic comeback of the alligator can be primarily attributed to strong enforcement of the existing regulatory mechanisms in effect these last 15 to 20 years. The alligator now requires an adjustment in the regulatory structure to provide long-term protection. It is believed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the proposed rules will not only protect current alligator populations, but will enhance their long-term prospects for returning to a healthy position in the wild.

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